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ABSTRACT

The skills of playwriting are correctable, the craft of playwriting is teachable, and the art of playwriting is encourageable. In the area of craft, students can learn through models how accomplished playwrights deal with plot, characterization, dialogue, and theme. For the first element, plot development, students can look at written models to understand the use of the traditional elements of dramatic development. Such things as exposition, inciting force, rising tension, climax, and resolution can be seen in the practice of those who have been successful in their efforts. Students can learn about the second element, characterization, from reading and studying models showing how different writers have shaped their own riverbeds and made their own tributaries. Students studying the third element, dialogue, can focus on the need to listen to language as it is spoken in life and as it is recorded by the playwright for respeaking by the actor. Finally, models can be studied for their theme or idea. Of course, every class discussion of the models should include references to the other elements of craft, but a primary focus for each play gives students a particular goal to pursue in their study of each particular model. (HOD)

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HELPING THE PLAYWRIGHT'S DREAMS GET OUT:

USING MODELS IN THE TEACHING OF PLAYWRITING

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by Ramon Delgado

> JOHN MERRICK: . . . sometimes I think my head is so big because it is so full of dreams. Because it is. Do you know what happens when dreams cannot get out?[1]

As the Olympic games were playing recently in Los Angeles, I was astounded by the accomplishments of physical training and grueling practice. Particularly fascinating were the gymnastic events where the names of Mary Lou Retton, Peter Vidmar, Bart Conner, and Mitch Gaylord and their other teammates became household words and role models for thousands of youngsters throughout the world. A new generation of dreams was inspired with enrollments in gym classes skyrocketing around the country.

Budding playwrights can learn a lesson from both the discipline and the principles of the would-be gymnist, for in order to let their dreams out, the young playwrights too, must

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1. Bernard Pomerance, The Elephant Man (New York: Samuel French), p. 30.

seek good models to emulate and then practice the principles illustrated by those models.

Every art has its models, and artists who become successful and productive, observe and emulate the models of their field. Musicians have the classics of Mozart, Beethoven, and Stravinsky. Dancers have the classical forms of ballet and the modern traditions of Martha Graham. Apprentice painters copy old masters such a Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and the newer models of Piccaso and Weyeth. As in the other arts, the aspirants to artistic levels of playwriting, should study the established classics and more recent successful models.

In order to achieve even moderate success in this difficult art, the student must achieve a degree of proficiency in three areas. One of these areas is correctable, one area is teachable, and one is encouragable.

The first area, the correctable level, is the level of skills--spelling, grammar, punctuation, formatting, typing or word processing. These are quite simply the basic tools that should be acquired in order to facilitate the communication of creative ideas in easily read form. Though it is not the area of primary responsibility for the playwriting instructor, many of us are shocked that far too many of our students are deficient in this area of skills. Poor skills cause unnecessary stumbling blocks to the development of playwrights. Fortunately, this level is correctable, and students can learn to use a dictionary,

and master the basics of grammar and punctuation with a minimum of drill. I also urge the aspiring playwright to move into the modern world with a word processor. It is an invaluable aid to revision as the fledgling playwright learns that plays are not only written, but they are rewritten--usually several times. For those with spelling problems, the computer age has been a salvation with programs that check and correct misspelled words.

It may surprise you that not all successful professional playwrights are good spellers. As series editor of Best Short Plays, I could cite several well-known professionals who suffer from a chronically misspelling typewriter, but as I have always been a terrible speller myself, their names shall remain a secret. Even Mark Twain felt sympathetic for the poor speller. "Regarding the rules of spelling," observed Mr. Twain, "I feel downright sorry for any boy who hasn't got enough imagination to spell a word more'n two or three ways. Such lack of creativity does not bode well for his prospects as a writer."

The second area, the teachable area, is the level of craft. Craft is the level of form which gives shape and focus to the playwright's intentions. To develop and improve craft, the aspiring playwright may study both theory and models, wisely observing how theory is manifest in skillfully crafted models. We'll return to this point shortly with more details.

The third area, the encourageable area, is the level of art. It is at this level that the individuality of the artist

filters experience through the artist's viewpoint and formulates the results through his or her craft and skills. It is this area of art where the playwright's dreams can be approached.

Today I would like to focus your attention on the second area--the use of models in developing craft. Though some students and a few teachers would disdain the notion that they could learn or teach anything worthwhile through the study of models and the principles contained in those models, one takes this position only at great risk. We live in a time when critics praise novelty of form as if novelty of form were the only criteria for excellence of artistic work. Such misguided pigheadedness, usually ends up praising shadow rather than substance, by focusing on the periphery rather than the essence. Lehman Engels, the late, great teacher of musical theatre once commented on the necessity of form:

> The principles I speak of are not rules; they are merely the expressions of the usable practices that can be derived from the work of our best practitioners. It is quite possible and perhaps even desirable for a talented writer who fully understands the principles, as they have come down to us, to depart from them provided he is <u>aware</u> of his departure and has knowingly substituted some other (perhaps now undreamed of) workable element to replace what

> he chooses to reject from the past . . . the "new" has been authentically new when it has consciously descended from a knowledge of everything good that has preceded it.[2]

The most obvious reference points for form and principles are to be found in successful plays available as models--not to be rigidly imitated, but to be freely emulated. One of the best sources for recent successful models is the annual series published by Chilton Book Company, Best Short Plays, revived in 1968 by editor Stanley Richards from the earlier annual that ceased with the retirement of Margaret Mayorga, and continued since 1981 under my own editorship.

Such models can be used to study those aspects of the playwriting craft which are common to the majority of good plays. There are four such elements that I will focus on today: plot development, characterization, dialogue, and theme. In many ways these four elements are parallel to the basic compositional elements of a painting, as Kurt Sachs suggests in his book The Commonwealth of Art (a book unfortunately now out of print though still in many college libraries).

The first element, plot development, is similar to the

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2. Cit. by Edward Mabley, Dramatic Construction (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Co., 1972), p. 3.

visual element of line, for the plot structure like line in a painting holds the focus of the subject together, supports the contents, and drives home the theme in an organized fashion. Awareness of this parallel is evident in one of Henry's speeches in Tom Stoppard's recent play The Real Thing:

> HENRY: (After returning with an old cricket bat.) This thing here, which looks like a wooden club, is actually several pieces of a particular wood cunningly put together in a certain way so that the whole thing is sprung, like a dance floor. It's for hitting cricket balls with. If you get it right, the cricket ball will travel two hundred yards in four seconds, and all you've done is give it a knock like knocking the top off a bottle of stout, and it makes a noise like a trout taking a fly . . . (He clucks his tongue to make the noise.) What we're trying to do is to write cricket bats, so that when we throw up an idea and give it a little knock, it might . . . travel . . . (He clucks his tongue again and picks up the script [Billy Brodie's ineptly written anarchist play].) Now, what we've got here is a lump of wood of roughly the same shape trying to be a cricket bat, and if you

> hit a ball with it, the ball will travel about ten feet and you will drop the bat and dance about shouting 'Ouch!' with your hands stuck into your armpits."[3]

To make the plot line travel we can look at our models for their use of the traditional elements of dramatic development. Such things as exposition, inciting force, rising tension, climax, and resolution can be seen in the practice of those who have been successful in their efforts.

The second element of the playwriting craft that we study from our models is characterization. Characterization is similar to mass in a painting. The critical masses in a play are shaped by the playwright to define the forms of humanity that he or she sees and experiences. Tolstoy in his novel Resurrection writes:

> People are like rivers; they all contain the same water everywhere, yet each river at times will be narrow, swift, broad, smooth-flowing, clear, cold, muddy, warm. So it is with people. Each man carries within himself the germs of all human qualities, and sometimes he manifests the one or the other and is often quite unlike himself, while still remaining the

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3. The Real Thing, p. 52.

very same person. In some people these changes are especially abrupt--they occur because of some physical or spiritual reason.[4]

What we can learn about characterization from reading and studying models is how different writers have shaped their own riverbeds and made their own tributaries.

The third element of the playwright's craft we can study in models is the element of dialogue. The playwright selects words for their sound and sense to excite the ear as the painter selects color and textures to excite the eye. Another speech of Henry's in Stoppard's The Real Thing underscores the importance of word choice:

> HENRY: Words . . . [a]re innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, describing that, meaning the other, so if you look after them you can build bridges across incomprehension and chaos. But when they get their corners knocked off, they're no good any more . . . If you get the right ones in the right order, you

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4. Cit. by Stanislavski in Stanislavski's Legacy, p. 15.

> can nudge the world a little or make a poem
> which children will speak for you when you're
> dead.[5]

Through the use of models we can call the student's attention to the need to listen to language as it is spoken in life and as it is recorded by the playwright for re-speaking by the actor. Then the models can be studied to illustrate character differences of 1) grammatical usage, 2) use of images, and 3) complexity of sentence structure. A few exercises in comparing conversation from daily life with dialogue in one of the model plays can give students an ear-opening experience.

Lastly, models can be studied for their theme or idea. This element is parallel to the subject matter of the visual artist. I have placed theme last in this discussion because though the theme may be one of the first things we might consider in the analysis of a completed script, it frequently is the last element the playwright understands about what he or she is expressing.

A list of plays from the 1982, 1983, and 1984 volumes of Best Short Plays divided for study among these four elements of craft has been appended to this discussion. Two other areas of craft, Atmosphere and Comedy Techniques, are also included in

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5. The Real Thing, p. 54.

the list. Of course every class discussion of the models includes references to the other elements of craft, but a primary focus for each play gives students a particular goal to pursue in their study of each particular model.

You may well wonder if this use of models really helps the playwright? To paraphrase part of the Hippocratic oath: it will do no harm. Or as we might observe from viewing a painting by Rembrandt: "Genius can only be enhanced by craft."

As students are reading and studying the model plays, they are also writing their own original projects and putting into practice things they have learned from the models and principles of craft studied. Such an approach with models gives students far more guidance that the bare study of dramatic theory. It also provides a sounder base for a student's further development than the "write what you know or feel" approach. Additionally, the study of models can save a lot of floundering and wasted effort, for when students understand that good plays have sound structure and writing technique, they are more likely to respond to the instructor's suggestion to work from a well constructed outline that contains and controls the playwrights characters, story, and ideas. Playwright Edward Mabley has this result in mind when he writes:

> To begin writing without knowing where one is going is to head for the wilderness, with

> normally little prospect of finding one's way out again. Such writing is almost always wasted effort, abandoned long before the project nears a conclusion, for the playwright has lost his way.[6]

In closing let me summarize. The skills of playwriting are correctable, the craft of playwriting is teachable, and the art of playwriting is encourageable. In the area of craft students learn through studying models how accomplished playwrights deal with plot, characterization, dialogue, and theme. We as instructors can enhance our students's facility with craft and thus encourage them to let their dreams get out with the facility of a gymnast. And lastly, remember the admonition of the elephant man, John Merrick:

> . . . sometimes I think my head is so big because it is so full of dreams. Because it is. Do you know what happens when dreams cannot get out?

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6. Mabley, p. 33.

MODELS IN LEARNING PLAYWRITING

(Examples from BEST SHORT PLAYS edited by Ramon Delgado. Chilton Book Co. Radnor, Pennsylvania, 19089.)

	1982	1983	1984
I.	PLOT: CONFLICT/ACTION		
	"Today A Little Extra" Michael Kassin	"The Color of Heat" Saul Zachary	"Self Torture and Strenuous Exercise" Harry Kondoleon
II.	PLOT: SUSPENSE/NON-CONFLICT		
	"Ball Boys" David Edgar	"Old Soldiers" Martin Jones	"Partners" David Higgins
III.	PLOT: EPISODIC/COLLAGE		
	"Reflections in a Window" Beverley Byers Pevitts	"More Lives Than One" Norman Holland	"Juvie" Jerome McDonough
IV.	PLOT: DRAMATIC ISSUE		
	"The Dance and the Railroad" David Henry Hwang	"A Need for Brussels Sprouts" Murray Schisgal	"Present Tense" John McNamara
V.	CHARACTERIZATION		
	"Thymus Vulgaris" Lanford Wilson	"Confluence" John Bishop	"F.M." Romulus Linney
VI.	DIALOGUE		
	"In Fireworks Lie Secret Codes" John Guare	"It Ain't the Heat,It's the Humility" Tom Huey	"Chug" Ken Jenkins
VII.	THEME		
	"Vivien" Percy Granger	"Andante un Poco Mosso" Jennifer Johnston	"The Other Woman" Casey Kelly
VIII.	ATMOSPHERE		
	"Minnesota Moon" John Olive	"A Loss of Memory" Arthur Laurents	"In Place" Corinne Jacker
IX.	COMEDY TECHNIQUES		
	"Chocolate Cake" Mary Gallagher	"Charlie the Chicken" Jonathan Levy	"Nice People Dancing to Good Country Music" Patrick Tovatt